Gender stereotypes and nature vs. nurture

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Is gender difference a result of nature or nurture? Is neuroscience research being manipulated to support gender stereotypes? A debate at the Festival of Ideas will explore the issue later this month.

Leading neuroscientist Professor Simon Baron Cohen will be taking part in a debate at this year's Cambridge Festival of Ideas on whether science has been used to promote gender stereotypes.

Neuroscientists have been criticised in recent books by feminist writers such as Natasha Walter's Living Dolls for bolstering gender stereotypes.

Simon Baron Cohen, professor of developmental psychopathology at the University of Cambridge, says critics who argue that gender difference is all a question of socialisation are in danger of oversimplifying the interaction of biology and experience. He says: "Some gender

differences in the mind and behaviour may in part be the result of our biology (prenatal hormones and genes) interacting with our experience. The old nature vs. nurture debate is absurdly simplistic and a moderate position recognises the interaction of both.

He adds that he is wary of neuroscience research being used to bolster traditional gender stereotypes. He says: "The main goal of neuroscience is to understand the mind, and is certainly not to bolster traditional views."

Joining him in the Gender difference: nature vs nurture debate on 30th October are Dr Laura Nelson, who did her PhD in neuroscience at the University of Cambridge and has campaigned successfully against gender stereotypes, getting Hamley's toyshop to remove gender specific signs and launching a gender stereotype-busting project in schools. She will draw the link between inequality, toyshops and brains and address how the myths lock inequality in place and what we can do about them.

Deborah Cameron, Rupert Murdoch professor of language and communication at the University of Oxford, will talk about how our language is influenced by and influences gender stereotypes. She says: "Human language depends on both 'nature' and 'nurture', and both may be expected to produce some differences in the linguistic behaviour of men and women. Yet much of what is currently asserted about the 'naturalness' of male-female differences in language use is not supported by sociolinguistic research."

She is interested in why we are currently so attached to the idea that men and women communicate differently.

Jo-Anne Dillabough, reader in education at the University of Cambridge, will speak about how the nature vs nurture debate influences education.

The debate is one of many taking place at this year's Festival of Ideas, which runs from 24 October to 4 November.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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